

# THE GREAT WAR and the Shaping of the 20th Century

## Lesson Plan Two: Symbols of the Stalemate

### Overview

Though central and allied powers vied for victory during WWI, and undertook what was perceived to be strategic battle plans, the involved parties made few gains. In fact, WWI was initially intended to be a short war, but the failure of certain military strategies and trench warfare led to a deadlock that would only come to an end in 1918. In this lesson, students will examine this stalemate and the failed efforts to break it.

### Learning Objectives

As a result of completing these activities, students will:

- Identify and analyze the factors that led to WWI's stalemate
- Determine how altered battle plans could have to the war's earlier end
- Examine The Schlieffen plan and analyze and rectify its strategic flaws
- Explore the impact of trench warfare on the war's progression

### Standards

This lesson meets the following standards set by the Mid-Century Research for Education and Learning (<http://www.mcnel.org/compendium/search.asp>):

### World History

#### *Standard 39*

Understands the causes and global consequences of World War I

#### *Benchmarks*

Understands events that contributed to the outbreak of World War I (e.g., diverse long-range causes of World War I, such as political and economic rivalries, ethnic and ideological conflicts, militarism, imperialism, and nationalism; how nationalism threatened the balance of power among the Great Powers in Europe, and why it was considered one of the causes of World War I)

Understands the role of the U.S. and other countries in World War I (e.g., how the Russian Revolution and the entry of the United States affected the course and outcome of the war, motivations behind the entrance of the U.S. into the war)

### United States History

#### *Standard 21*

Understands the changing role of the United States in world affairs through World War I

#### *Benchmarks*

Understands U.S. involvement in World War I (e.g., how the American Expeditionary Force contributed to the Allied victory, Wilson's Fourteen Points,

the negotiation of the Versailles Treaty, the national debate over treaty ratification and the League of Nations)

Understands the impact of the United States involvement in World War I (e.g., U.S. military and economic mobilizations for war and the role of labor, women, and African Americans in the war effort; World War I military engagements and the campaigns in which the American Expeditionary Force participated; the impact of the war on American troops; Wilson's goals in recommending the establishment of a League of Nations)

## **Materials**

- Computers with Internet access
- Print and online materials on the WWI stalemate
- Phase Two: Deadlock handout

## **Estimated Time**

Three to four classroom periods (in addition to homework)

## **Teaching Strategy**

### **Activity 1: The Stalemate's Foundation**

Write the word STALEMATE on the blackboard and ask students what it means. Definitions include:

- a situation in which no progress can be made or no advancement is possible; "reached an impasse on the negotiations"
- A situation in which further action is blocked; a deadlock

Ask students how they think this term applies to WWI, based on their understanding of the war's beginning and progression.

Divide the class into groups of two. Distribute the handout *Phase Two: Deadlock*. Instruct the teams to read the piece describing WWI's stalemate, and then to discuss and note the deadlock's causes—how they transpired, the strategies employed, who was involved, who was affected. Ask each team to share its findings. Synthesize student responses to create a list of the stalemate's major causes.

Instruct teams to conduct additional research on the causes of the stalemate the class has identified. Refer them to the following Great War links as well as the web resources listed below.

- The Great War: Stalemate  
[http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1\\_overview.html](http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1_overview.html)

- The Great War: More on Stalemate  
[http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1\\_stalemate.html](http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1_stalemate.html)
- French Bravery and German Firepower  
[http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/historian/hist\\_wilson\\_01\\_bravery.html](http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/historian/hist_wilson_01_bravery.html)
- The Outbreak of War  
[http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/maps/maps\\_outbreak.html](http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/maps/maps_outbreak.html)

Divide students into groups representing WWI allied and central power military strategists who have recognized the war's stalemate. Instruct each group to come up with a plan -- based on their understanding of the deadlock's contributors -- that will end the deadlock. Then, have the groups discuss the various plans and come to consensus on the best strategies for ending the stalemate, which indicates that the powers will have to make concessions.

### **Activity 2: The Schlieffen Plan**

Explain to students that one of the primary factors contributing to WWI's stalemate were failed military plans, perceived initially to be strategic and without flaw. This was the case with Germany's Schlieffen Plan, meant to conquer quickly and lead to victory. However, the plan failed.

Direct students to resources to learn more about the Schlieffen Plan. As a class, discuss the strategy behind the plan, how it was to be implemented, and why it failed. Have students speculate on how the plan might have worked had certain factors been taken into consideration beforehand, such as the potential of attack by enemies and even the physical route upon which the plan was based.

- The Schlieffen Plan  
<http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1914m/schlieffen.html>
- Schlieffen Plan  
<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWschlieffenP.htm>
- The Schlieffen Plan  
[http://www.schoolhistory.co.uk/gcse/links/wars/firstwwlinks/schlieffen\\_summary.html](http://www.schoolhistory.co.uk/gcse/links/wars/firstwwlinks/schlieffen_summary.html)
- What was the Schlieffen Plan?  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/history/britainwwi/schlieffenplanandbelgiumrev2.shtml>
- About the Schlieffen Plan  
<http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/greatwar/default.htm>

- Feature Articles: The Planning of the War  
<http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/plans.htm>

### Activity 3: Trench Warfare

Have students visualize a trench and to describe what it is. What kind of an image does it evoke? What kind of feeling does it evoke? Then ask students to describe what they believe it was like for soldiers during WWI to fight in trenches and what they think that entailed. For images depict what life was like for soldiers holed up in trenches, direct them to the video clips and photographs ([http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1\\_trench.html](http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1_trench.html)) of soldiers in the trenches on the Great War site. Ask them to also read the “Trench Facts” on the same page.

Provide students with some background on WWI’s trench warfare and why it was a symbol of the war’s stalemate. (Refer to the following sites, which students can also use for their project research.)

- The Trenches: Symbol of Stalemate  
[http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1\\_trench.html](http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1_trench.html)
- The Trenches: Symbol of Stalemate  
[http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1\\_stalemate.html](http://www.pbs.org/greatwar/chapters/ch1_stalemate.html)
- Why Trenches?  
<http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/greatwar/default.htm>
- What was life like in the trenches?  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/history/britainwwi/trenchesrev2.shtml>
- Gas Attack, 1916  
<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/gas.htm>
- Trench Warfare  
<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWtrench.htm>

Divide students into small groups who will examine various aspects of trench warfare to present to the class. Students can do one or more of the following activities:

- Recreate the trench system in a visual format, particularly noting the placement of trenches on the western and eastern fronts
- Gather and analyze primary source documents reflecting firsthand trench experiences, and then, in the voice of a soldier, write several journal first person journal entries reflecting his time spent in the trenches.
- Create a chart representing the hazards of trench life and its impact on soldiers, including casualties.

- Strategically analyze how trench warfare contributed to WWI's stalemate and propose other battle strategies that may have ended the war sooner, with fewer casualties.
- Assume the roles of key WWI military leaders and write briefs that discuss how trench warfare has impeded military strategy and recommendations they have for strategies that will eradicate trenches in order to make military advances toward victory for their respective nations.

### **Online Resources**

WWI: Attack to Stalemate

<http://mars.acnet.wnec.edu/~grempe/courses/ww1/lectures/stalemate.html>

World War I Invasion and Stalemate: The Schlieffen Plan

<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1094.html>

A World War I Photo Essay

<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/ww1/photoessay.htm>

### **Assessment Recommendations**

Administer a flash card quiz that require students to report on all they know about a particular topic (e.g., flash a card with the term Schlieffen Plan and have students share what they know on this subject.) Create rubrics to measure student participation in group activities. Measure student ability to analytically revisit and analyze information.

### **Extension Activity**

- Have students create World War I Learning Corners where students can display and present the results of their various projects related to this lesson.

### **About the Author**

Michele Israel has been an educator in varied capacities for more than 20 years. As founder and director of Educational Consulting Group, Israel currently serves nonprofit and educational institutions, providing services including strategic planning, educational product development and project management. In addition, she produces learning materials and writes articles for companies such as PBS, Education World and CNN/Turner Learning.

**Student Handout**  
**World War I**  
**Phase Two: Deadlock**

By the end of 1914, the two sides settled into trenches and faced each other across no man's land, the area between the trenches on the western and eastern fronts. A war of attrition was underway, with each side trying to wear down the other. This harsh reality had a devastating effect on the morale of the soldiers on both sides. At the beginning, most people expected that the war would be over by Christmas 1914. This expectation prompted an outburst of patriotic enthusiasm on the part of the soldiers headed to the front as well as on the part of the civilians left behind. Young men eagerly signed up to achieve the type of glory that was associated with fighting for one's country.

However, when the early offensives failed and the casualties mounted, a widespread sense of despair developed in the trenches. The public did not know the extent of the despair because governments concealed it from them by imposing rigid censorship. Governments prevented news reporting of the slaughter at the front and intercepted mail from soldiers that contained messages of gloom and doom.

The Prussian military theorist Karl von Clausewitz once defined war as an extension of politics. But the political purposes of World War I had been lost amid the enormous death and destruction. The assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand and the rivalry between Austria-Hungary and Serbia in the Balkans were but distant memories with no relevance to the traumatic experience of soldiers on the battlefield. As the two sides confronted each other in trenches and periodically engaged in suicidal attempts to break the deadlock, the soldiers lost their original enthusiasm for the war effort. By 1917 the growing sense of despair and lack of purpose resulted in widespread discontent in the French and Russian armies.

**Causes of the Deadlock**

For three years of continuous warfare, neither side succeeded in gaining a decisive success on either of the main European fronts, in spite of the millions of lives sacrificed. By the end of 1914, the western front had solidified into two deeply entrenched systems of fortifications running west to east from the English Channel to the border of Switzerland. The fortifications consisted of numerous parallel lines of interconnected trenches protected by lines of barbed wire. The leaders on both sides thought that the way to achieve a breakthrough was to penetrate enemy lines and gain access to open country. In the open country, they believed that they could regain the ability to maneuver. They also thought that the only way to penetrate enemy lines was to start a massive artillery bombardment of a chosen sector and to follow it up with a massive infantry assault.

However, both sides had equal forces, so they could repel enemy attempts to overwhelm entrenched defensive positions. The tragic equilibrium, as it has been called, caused continued assaults. With each assault, both sides attempted to improve upon the

preceding one, chiefly by adding more artillery shells to the bombardment and more men to the attack. As more soldiers were killed in futile efforts to overrun enemy positions, leaders continued the same pattern because they felt that they had to prove that it would succeed, thus justifying the slaughter of their troops.

The reason that the leaders continued using this suicidal strategy for the remainder of the war was that no alternative appeared to exist. Maintaining fixed positions in the trenches was no solution, since it produced only boredom and eventually despair. In addition, as each army appointed new leaders, they resumed the deadly offensives to try to earn a place in history by masterminding a breakthrough that would end the war.

Another factor in the deadlock on the western front was that Germany had occupied almost all of Belgium and parts of northern France since the beginning of the war. The French people and their government did not want to entertain any war aim other than recovering the occupied territory and its inhabitants. France's preoccupation with this goal hampered British-French strategy.

The French commander in chief on the northeastern front in France considered that area the only front worthy of French resources, and he also felt that the British should loyally accept the same viewpoint. The British, however, had developed other war aims to break the stalemate that did not always coincide with those of their French allies. For example, officials in London wanted to concentrate on the British war effort against the Ottoman Empire. To the French, the war in the Middle East was much less important than the struggle to liberate the occupied portions of northeastern France. As a result, the two allies continually disputed military priorities.

On the eastern front, there was also stalemate, although geographically the armies had plenty of room to maneuver. The Russians followed a strategy that had brought them success against previous invasions from the west in other wars. Russian armies would withdraw eastward deep into Russia's interior, fighting bloody defensive battles as opportunity offered. Then, as the invading armies wasted away, Russia's vast reservoirs of manpower would refill the Russian ranks.

In World War I, however, the strategy did not work. Russian industry could not furnish enough weapons or ammunition to supply the reserve of manpower. On the other hand, the periodic British and French offensives in the west prevented Germany from transferring sufficient forces to the eastern front. Without these troops, the Germans could not shatter the Russian armies and achieve victory. Thus, the exchange of fighting continued, and neither side gained a decisive edge on the eastern front until the Russian Revolutions of 1917.

**Source:** Encarta

[http://encarta.msn.com/text\\_761569981\\_\\_\\_31/World\\_War\\_I.html](http://encarta.msn.com/text_761569981___31/World_War_I.html)